Introduction

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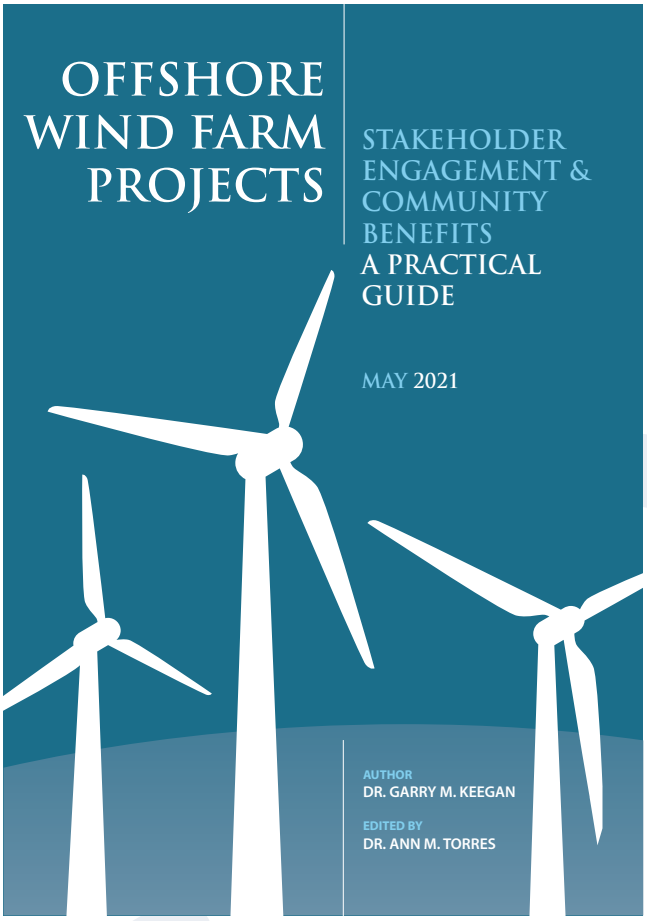
Social Science of Wind Energy Acceptance



This guide provides practical recommendations for Offshore Wind Farm Projects, Stakeholder Engagement, and Community Benefits.

Many countries have a strong track record in the deployment of onshore wind farms. A small number of countries (e.g., UK, Germany, Denmark, Netherlands) account for most of all operational offshore wind capacity connected globally, most of which comprises fixed, rather than floating turbine technology. Many other countries (e.g., Ireland, Portugal, Norway, Finland, France, Canada, USA, Australia, Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam, and Taiwan) are in their infancy of offshore wind farm development and have plans underway to grow this sector significantly.

Community acceptance has been a key constraint to the development of onshore wind projects. Offshore wind projects also experience resistance among coastal and port communities. There is an opportunity to learn from international best practice in community acceptance and stakeholder engagement. Community engagement practitioners and communications departments of established offshore wind farm developers were generous in sharing their expertise to create this document.

The potential for Irish offshore wind projects is well documented in terms of economic and social benefits, investment, jobs, and supply chain integrity. In Ireland, companies such as SSE, DP Energy, Parkwind, ESB, Equinor, Ocean Winds, Saorgus, Statkraft, Simply Blue Energy, Energia, and RWE Renewables are progressing projects off the East and South-east coasts.

The current system of transition protocol, different government department involvement, Maritime Area Consent, Marine Protected Areas, Maritime Area Planning Bill (MAP), and An Bord Planeala, debate the merits of decentralised (i.e., developer led) versus centralised grid integration, which is cumbersome and hard to navigate.

These offshore wind projects represent substantial financial investments and the benefits of offshore are attractive. Yet, there is a lack of industry coherence in the appreciation of, and approach to, social acceptance of offshore wind projects, especially with respect to community acceptance in terms of procedural and distributive justice. Individual projects are progressing through the various regulatory stages, however, there is little evidence of coordinated communication campaigns to educate and inform the public. Also lacking are industry agreements regarding the implementation of best practices for community acceptance and local stakeholder engagement among host communities.

Consenting and marine spatial planning arrangements differ depending on the jurisdiction. For example, if the support scheme for offshore wind is based on competitive bidding (i.e., auctions and tendering) where the lowest bid wins, it will affect the capabilities to undertake stakeholder engagement and deliver community benefits. These initiatives add to the project costs, even though they are a relatively small financial investment in comparison to the overall project budget. Policy makers need to consider whether certain standards and social metrics should be part of the bidding criteria.

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Regardless of the project location, the following five criteria should be considered.

1. **Social Acceptance Strategy:**
There needs to be an overarching social acceptance strategy developed for offshore wind projects developed by the relevant national authorities (state agencies) in concert with industry representatives. The absence of an agreed industry strategy has led to a lack of consistency as different projects pursue different approaches. This inconsistency adds to the confusion local and national stakeholders may experience. Project promoters must be cognisant that host communities are non-homogenous and social acceptance strategies need to be responsive to the unique values and needs of individual host communities.

2. **Consenting Regime:**
At each stage of the project lifecycle providing clarity on the consenting regime should form part of the local stakeholder engagement plan.

3. **Stakeholder Interface:**
The intensity of stakeholder interface varies with the project lifecycle.

4. **Project Ownership:**
A key consideration is the project ownership, as this changes from the beginning to end of a project's lifecycle. Many projects are initiated and owned by project promoters who do not have the intention, capability or capacity to deliver the project to its completion. This changing ownership raises the question as to whether such promoters have the inclination and resources to implement stakeholder engagement competently. Further, when promoters sell a project to a large industry entity, the question becomes what stakeholder engagement continuity prevails – industry should ensure this in order to help protect the sectors reputation and ensure its growth amicably with the public. Ownership change in the onshore sector is much more common. When a consortium of owners is involved in an offshore project, it is important the owners agree on a strategy regarding stakeholder engagement, communications, and community benefits.

5. **Stakeholder Engagement Plans:**
Considering the importance of and the financial investment required to deliver an offshore project, stakeholder planning and engagement is a small cost that delivers high value. Also consider the risk of not doing adequate stakeholder engagement – higher likelihood for project failure and/or perceptions of injustice.

Opposition groups may campaign on issues such as democratic deficit, negative impacts on visual amenities, tourism, heritage, birds, fish and marine life, and commercial fishing. Cable landing points and onshore cable routes may prove to be significant issues with host communities, in addition to electric magnetic field (EMF) concerns, and inadequacies of Foreshore/Marine legislation may also be highlighted in such submissions. In one German study, shipping security was important to residents, as shipping accidents pollute local beaches. Coastal communities and stakeholders, such as fishermen, may claim they have no information and there has been a lack of consultation. Although the developer may be at the early stage of consent, conducting marine and environmental surveys should be part of the planning process requirements. The developer's message can become lost in a poorly informed media narrative, or public discourse. As a result, the developer will quickly find they are under pressure to take a reactive stance, rather than proactively engaging with stakeholders. Further, not being proactive damages the prospects for future offshore projects. To safeguard community interests, developers should appoint a Community Liaison Representative (preferably someone who is familiar with the area and receives the appropriate training), and if resources allow, a Fishing Liaison Officer, who may be a retired member of the local fishing community.

Rather than pursuing a silo approach, it would be beneficial to pursue a coordinated approach, in which all developers agree on the procedural stages, strategies, and techniques for deploying a:

- Stakeholder Relations Advisor (titles and roles can differ depending on jurisdiction and project scale – Community Liaison and Fishing Liaison for example)
- Stakeholder Relations Programme
- Community Engagement Programme
- Community Benefits Programme (i.e., including Local Supply Chain initiatives)

In pursuing a coordinated approach, the offshore industry, can look to the best practices employed in other jurisdictions. Many companies developing offshore projects in new territories, also operate in countries where there are established best practice approaches for local stakeholder engagement.

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Other Constructive Considerations

Stakeholder Identification:
Stakeholders need to be identified and consulted, early and throughout the project. Developers, through industry representative structures, should be obliged and/or guided to undertake wide-ranging and flexible community engagement methods to facilitate ongoing dialogue. Clear guidelines or a Code of Conduct for community engagement, tailored to the local context, would facilitate this dialogue.

Consultative Forums:
Key stakeholders, such as the fishing community, port, and coastal communities, need a forum in which dialogue can occur with those supporting the offshore project. The coalition of the willing, often comprised of the government and politicians, the national and regional authorities, developers and local stakeholders, need to embrace and promote offshore projects in a unified manner.

Community Obligations and Contributions:
Even though coastal communities may not be affected by the offshore construction works, they are neighbours who should be considered. For example, visual impact may be more of a concern for some coastal communities. There are examples where the closest coastal community may not be the one most affected due to onshore construction works elsewhere. That is, the grid connection and substation is placed in an area which is not visually impacted. For example, the Beatrice Offshore Wind Farm in Scotland, where Caithness is the closest area, but the grid connection and substation is placed in the area of Moray.

Consenting and Planning Process:
These processes need to be communicated in a way that is easy to understand, transparent, and collaborative in terms of citizen engagement. An offshore wind public participation guide would be beneficial.

Other Non-host Community Stakeholders:
Other relevant stakeholders are the military and aviation interests, where radar may be relevant. The navy where harbour protection, coastal security, customs, war ships, and the use of drones are issues for consideration. Small and large commercial fishing fleets, which operate co-operatives and shipping lanes, need to be part of broader industry groups so they are on-message in terms of industry objectives and communication.

Government Offshore Wind Development Committee:
As a statement of intent and to provide leadership, focus, and proactivity, it is advisable to create a governmental committee for offshore wind development. This committee would act as a dedicated forum for local stakeholder and community voices.

Investor Confidence:
As offshore wind farms are long-term, capital-intensive investments, a key challenge for investors is confidence in the government's strategic commitment to the sector. This confidence needs to percolate through to local stakeholders and local seaside/coastal/port communities.

National Wind Energy Association:
Most offshore developers are members of the National Wind Energy Association's Offshore Committee. This committee could assist in the coordination of guidelines and standards to achieve community acceptance.

Social Acceptance:
Offshore wind projects should increase when people are aware of the positive impacts associated with offshore wind energy. Alternative energy sources, such as oil and gas, have limited reserves. Further, oil and gas can be perceived as more expensive and more polluting. The geo-political security of supply considerations should also be stressed in the public dialogue. The general public may be more accepting of offshore wind projects, than the local host community (i.e., perceived local pain, in exchange for national gain). Again, representations concerning visual impact and shipping collisions should be expected.

Public Acceptance Research:
Offshore wind public acceptance research should be commissioned in countries where offshore planning and deployment is relatively new. One example is to establish a monitoring programme, which focuses on public acceptance before and after the installation of an offshore wind farm, as a means to monitor the degree of public involvement and active conflict management. Consultation with the research sector (e.g., state agencies, University post-doctoral programmes) would be desirable.

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Marine and Renewable Energy Ireland (MaREI):

MaREI, a Science Foundation Ireland centre based at University College Cork, surveyed 1,154 people and found there is significant support from the Irish public for the development of offshore windfarms in Irish waters. Of those surveyed, 93% said they would not object to an offshore windfarm anywhere in Irish waters and 87% said they would not object to the development of an offshore windfarm off the coast of their locality. Additionally, 60% of respondents said that seeing offshore wind turbines made them feel they were helping to forestall the climate crisis.

MaREI's lead researcher noted that "Moving turbines offshore can help to overcome issues of space for wind turbines on land. It can also help to meet targets for clean, renewable energy and create jobs as Ireland seeks to rebuild the economy." The survey findings suggest those with experience of offshore windfarms are more positive towards their development in Irish waters than those with no experience of offshore windfarms. In terms of the effect on wildlife, tourism and aesthetics, respondents said offshore turbines are relatively unobtrusive.

Subsequent to MaREI's survey, the Irish Government announced its intention to fast-track seven offshore wind projects in the Irish Sea under a new planning regime. Under the Climate Action Plan, the Irish Government is aiming to have 70% of Ireland's electricity generated from renewable sources by 2030.

According to the World Wind Energy Association (WWEA), developers should demonstrate how their proposed development, as a recommended renewable energy initiative, is sustainable and of a net benefit to the community. To facilitate this argument, early engagement with relevant stakeholders on the comparative benefits of feasible options is recommended. WWEA recommends a comprehensive stakeholder consultation and participation process so as to mitigate the risk of community opposition, or loss of support for the project.

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